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5,000 leaving for war games

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More than 5,000 Schofield Barracks soldiers are leaving for large-scale war games in California as final preparations are made for a summer deployment to Iraq.

About 3,000 soldiers with the 3rd Brigade, 1,000 soldiers and 60 helicopters with the combat aviation brigade, 400 troops with a sustainment brigade and 480 soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry — who will act as an opposition force — are among those expected to arrive at Fort Irwin by early this week for about a month of training.

The National Training Center sprawls over 1,100 square miles of Mojave Desert and includes a series of U.S. camps, mock Iraqi villages and simulated roadside bomb threats.

About 7,000 soldiers with the 25th Infantry Division (Light) are scheduled to deploy to Iraq. It will be the largest deployment to the country for the "Tropic Lightning" division.

Through 2004, 5,200 Schofield soldiers served in Iraq. Thirteen soldiers were killed.

A deployment ceremony is scheduled for July 7.

"In the latter part of the summer, most are going to be deploying," said Lt. Col. Mike Donnelly, a Schofield spokesman. "Nobody leaves at the same time. A lot of stuff goes early because equipment has to get there — helicopters, (shipping containers,) trucks."

Those shipments will be made sometime after mid-June.

About 100 helicopters will be sent to Iraq. The division has 45 UH-60 Black Hawks, 10 CH-47 twin-rotor Chinooks and 55 OH-58-D Kiowa Warrior scout and reconnaissance helicopters.

Maj. Gen. Benjamin R. Mixon, commander of the 25th Infantry Division, will be in charge of military operations in northern Iraq.

Mixon will take over Multinational Division North from Maj. Gen. Thomas Turner II and the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), which assumed responsibility for the region on Nov. 1.

Turner, in a Jan. 20 news briefing from Iraq, said the region is about the size of Pennsylvania, includes a population of 10.2 million, and extends north of Baghdad to the border with Iran in the east, Turkey in the north, and Syria in the west.

Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit in Mosul province and the oil-producing city of Kirkuk are part of that area of responsibility. Kirkuk was the headquarters for Schofield's 2nd Brigade when it deployed in 2004.

In November, the headquarters for Multinational Division North moved out of an 18-palace compound in Tikrit on the Tigris River and to nearby Forward Operating Base Speicher.

Turner's task force includes about 23,000 U.S. soldiers.

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The units under Mixon will include, in addition to Hawai'i's 3rd Brigade Combat Team, parts of the following units: the 2nd Infantry Division, 1st Cavalry Division and 82nd Airborne Division.

Turner said his most important mission remains the training and equipping of Iraqi security forces. That training is key to the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Turner was asked when it would be possible to pull back routine patrols in Mosul and Kirkuk and let the Iraqi army or police patrol those cities.

"We have four Iraqi battalions that have assumed battle space in our area and one brigade," Turner said. "The division that has responsibility for Mosul is doing very well, and in the next couple of months ... they will have battalions that will begin to assume battle space in that area, in Mosul in particular."

Speaking Friday from Iraq, Col. Dave Gray, who has responsibility for Kirkuk province, said Iraqi forces "have made great strides in their capability," and the Iraqi army's 2nd Brigade has conducted two brigade-sized operations with U.S. forces in support.

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